

THE U.S. PRESUMPTION OF QUICK, COSTLESS WARS

by Andrew P. N. Erdmann

Since the early 1980s, the presumption that the United States must end future military conflicts quickly and at minimum cost has achieved almost the status of orthodox dogma.¹ That military operations must be brief and efficient in terms of the human and economic price paid is not merely desirable, but held to be necessary in order to maintain the support of the American public.

Whether explicit or implicit, this quick, costless war presumption shapes policy pronouncements by leaders of the defense establishment, formal statements of military doctrine, analyses made by civilian strategists, and informal conversations throughout the armed services. In 1993 Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney argued that in “regional conflicts” where the nation’s “stake may seem less apparent,” the American response must be “decisive, requiring the high-quality personnel and technological edge to win quickly and with minimum casualties.” The U.S. Army’s central doctrinal statement, *Field Manual 100-5, Operations* (1993), echoes such sentiments in its characterization of the American View of War: “The American people expect decisive victory and abhor unnecessary casualties. They prefer quick resolution of conflicts and reserve the right to reconsider their support should any of these conditions not be met.” In a similar vein, the oft-cited civilian strategist Edward Luttwak stresses that “the prospect of high casualties, which can rapidly undermine domestic support for any military operation, is the key political constraint when decisions must be made on which forces to deploy in a crisis, and at what levels.” More bluntly, as recently recounted in *Parameters*, the quarterly of the U.S. Army War College, a military conference audience applauded when a young officer remarked that the U.S. military may someday suffer defeat in spite of its superior preparation and equipment because “the American people have lost the warrior’s edge.”²

¹This essay first appeared, in slightly different form, in *Orbis*, Summer 1999.

²See Dick Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), p. 15; U.S. Army, *Field Manual 100-5: Operations*

This presumption then came to the fore during the Kosovo campaign in 1999. Most fatefully, at the outset of the military campaign President Bill Clinton and his national security team pointedly emphasized that ground options to stop Serb atrocities in Kosovo were not being contemplated. As General Wesley Clark later acknowledged, the civilian leadership “felt that air was easier to get public support for than ground operations.” Outside the administration, many observers also shared the quick, costless war mindset, as epitomized by CNN commentator Steve Roberts’s assertion that “the American people does not have much of a stomach for these things.”³

Whence did this presumption come? And, more important, is it valid?

Origins of the Quick, Costless War Presumption

The current belief that Americans lack the requisite fortitude to endure prolonged military operations is ironic, because their history has been defined by success in such conflicts. The United States itself was born of a protracted war, preserved its unity in a savage civil war eighty years later, helped defeat Japanese militarism and European fascism in the greatest conflagration in history, and, finally, sustained for over four decades an unprecedented global engagement to contain the Soviet empire until it collapsed under the weight of its own internal contradictions. The origins of the quick, costless war presumption, however, are not found in these broad contours of American history, but rather in the specific context of the Vietnam War’s aftermath.

The search for “the lessons” of Vietnam dominated strategic discussions in the years following the inglorious evacuation of the U.S. embassy in Saigon. For those looking to prevent another such debacle, Vietnam stood as a reminder of the dilemmas war poses (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 14, 1993), pp. 1–3; Edward N. Luttwak, “A Post-Heroic Military Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 1996, p. 36; David Tucker, “Fighting Barbarians,” *Parameters*, Summer 1998, p. 74. The drafting of the new doctrinal statement *Field Manual 3-0: Operations* to replace FM 100-5 (1993) has been recently completed. Significantly, the 1986 edition of FM 100-5 did not contain any such assessment of the “American View of War.” See U.S. Army, *Field Manual 100-5: Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, May 5, 1986).

³Gen. Wesley Clark interview for “Frontline: War in Europe” (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/interviews/clark.html>); “CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer,” Apr. 11, 1999, 12:00 a.m. (Eastern Time) broadcast, Lexis-Nexis transcript no. 99041100V47. The Clinton administration’s declared intention to avoid using ground troops in Kosovo became “one of the chief errors in the campaign” because it reassured Serbian leaders that a NATO ground operation would not be forthcoming. Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 269.

for democratic governments. A democratic regime cannot indefinitely sustain an inconclusive, unpopular war. Yet some drew a slightly different lesson from the Vietnam experience, namely, that *any* protracted military engagement must become unpopular with the American people and, therefore, be unsustainable. Such reasoning was embedded in the pronouncements of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, including his famous “The Uses of Military Power” address of November 1984.⁴ Weinberger’s criteria for the use of American force hinged upon securing domestic support. And since he questioned whether the American public would support protracted operations, he insisted that “if combat forces are required, they should be introduced rapidly and in the strength necessary to achieve our objective at the least possible cost.”⁵ In the words of Samuel Huntington, the author of the seminal study of American civil-military relations *The Soldier and the State*, military leaders by the mid-1980s did “not want to act because they fear[ed] the absence of public support.”⁶ Emphasizing the liberal democratic nature of the American polity, Huntington agreed with Weinberger that “public opinion will not support a prolonged ‘slow bleed’ of American blood.” Huntington concluded that duration would be a critical factor in planning future military operations. “The United States must pursue objectives it can hope to achieve quickly and use means that minimize the time required to achieve those objectives,” he wrote. “We must aim for a first round knockout.”⁷ As embodied in the so-called Weinberger-Powell-Cheney Doctrine of “overwhelming” or “decisive” force, this stress upon the immediate success of military operations continues to shape military policy down to the present day.⁸

⁴Caspar W. Weinberger, “The Uses of Military Power,” Remarks to the National Press Club, Nov. 28, 1984, News Release No. 609-84, Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs); Caspar W. Weinberger, “U.S. Defense Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1986, pp. 684–90.

⁵Weinberger, “U.S. Defense Strategy,” p. 688.

⁶Samuel P. Huntington, “Playing to Win,” *National Interest*, Spring 1986, p. 12.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸For the development and application of the doctrine of “decisive force,” see Kenneth J. Campbell, “Once Burned, Twice Cautious: Explaining the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine,” *Armed Forces and Society*, Spring 1998, pp. 357–74; Christopher M. Gacek, *The Logic of Force: The Dilemma of Limited War in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 220–336; Frank G. Hoffman, “Decisive Force: A New American Way of War?” *Strategic Review*, Winter 1995, pp. 23–34; Colin Powell, “U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead,” *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1992/93, pp. 32–45; Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey*, with new afterword (New York: Ballantine, 1996), pp. 128–29, 139–45, 200, 280–81, 292–93, 420–21, 543–48, 559–62; Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), pp. 159–60, 401–2. See also the official statements of military strategy issued by the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the 1990s: Colin L. Powell, *National Military Strategy of the United States* (Washington,

Unquestionably, this emphasis on the need for public support of military operations was a healthy corrective to some earlier theories of limited war that tended to downplay the public dimension of the use of force.⁹ However, the more extreme form of this “lesson” of Vietnam—that the American public’s will was the weak link in the strategic chain and the ultimate cause of failure in Vietnam—should not have endured. As Harry Summers argued in *On Strategy*, and as recent studies that rely upon newly declassified documents reaffirm, the sources of American failure in Vietnam were not found in the public will, but in the failure of the nation’s civilian and military leadership to develop a coherent, viable strategy.¹⁰

Although triumph in the Persian Gulf War expunged many lingering concerns about U.S. military prowess, in recent years doubts about the staying power of the American people have increased to the point that the quick, costless war presumption now permeates discussions about the future national security policy of the United States.¹¹ The fact that both sides in recent debates over the merits of neo-isolationism,¹² the “revolution in military

D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1992); John M. Shalikashvili, *National Military Strategy of the United States of America 1995: A Strategy of Flexible and Selective Engagement* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1995); John M. Shalikashvili, *National Military Strategy of the United States of America 1997: Shape, Respond, Prepare Now—A Military Strategy for a New Era* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997).

⁹See the insightful analysis of Stephen Peter Rosen, “Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War,” *International Security*, Fall 1982, pp. 83–113.

¹⁰Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1984); Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995); Brian Vandemark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹¹The argument that follows does not focus upon the issue of casualty aversion per se. It does accord closely, however, with the assessment of Richard Betts: “It has become axiomatic that Americans will not tolerate many body bags in the course of an intervention where vital interests are not at stake. There is no clear evidence for this conventional wisdom, however, and ample evidence to the contrary.” Richard K. Betts, “What Will It Take to Deter the United States?” *Parameters*, Winter 1995–96, p. 76. For a useful investigation of the relationship between casualties and domestic support for U.S. military operations since the Second World War, see Eric Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U. S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996).

¹²In arguing *against* the “renewed threat” of isolationism, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., expresses concern over evidence of decreasing public willingness to support military operations abroad which risk American casualties. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “Back to the Womb? Isolationism’s Renewed Threat,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 1995, pp. 2–8. Harvey Sapolsky also emphasizes this purported aversion to casualties, but he employs this aversion to argue for a fundamental retrenchment of American military commitments. This advocacy of neo-isolationism is implied in Harvey M. Sapolsky and Jeremy Shapiro, “Casualties, Technology, and America’s Future Wars,” *Parameters*, Summer 1996, pp. 123–26. More recently, Sapolsky explicitly advocated a policy of

affairs” (RMA),¹³ and the culture of future warfare¹⁴ have taken for granted the American lack of will for protracted military operations only underscores its prominence and widespread acceptance. Some RMA proponents, for instance, allude to the decline in American will in order to reinforce their arguments for a *need* for new high-tech methods of warfighting. Thus, it is not just that technological developments are pushing evolution of a new mode of warfare, but that American political culture necessitates the search for a capacity to wage swift military campaigns with minimal casualties. For example, Alvin H. Bernstein and Martin Libicki exploit this rhetorical tactic when they argue that

distance [i.e., RMA-style] warfare, because of its relative safety, may offer an antidote to our persistent post-Vietnam aversion to the use of force in international affairs and to growing sensitivity about casualties among our own and even enemy soldiers. Indeed, in an era of rising isolationist sentiment, the tactics of distance warfare are likely to become the most muscular and credible tools available to the architects of American foreign policy.¹⁵

“restraint,” which entails U.S. military disengagement from Europe and Asia as well as a 50 percent reduction in the defense budget. Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security*, Spring 1997, pp. 5–48.

¹³In a critical appraisal of over-reliance upon the RMA, Charles J. Dunlap Jr. argues that American adoption of the RMA conception of warfare will create vulnerabilities which a ruthless adversary will then exploit with ingenious asymmetric strategies. Such an enemy might focus upon undermining the weak American public will, for example, by transmitting on global television the mutilation of female prisoners of war. Edward Luttwak agrees that the American public no longer has the stomach to endure significant casualties. However, he advocates increased reliance upon RMA-type weapons systems since these are the only weapons whose use the public might then support. Although they stand on different sides of the RMA debate, therefore, both Dunlap and Luttwak invoke the assumptions that undergird the quick, costless war presumption. Charles J. Dunlap Jr., “How We Lost the High-Tech War of 2007,” *Weekly Standard*, Jan. 29, 1996, pp. 22–28; Luttwak, “A Post-Heroic Military Policy,” pp. 40–44.

¹⁴For analyses that suggest that future conflict will be less state-centric, more likely in “complex” terrain favoring the defense, more primitive and barbaric, and, thus, a special challenge for Americans and their values, see Dunlap, “How We Lost the High-Tech War of 2007”; Charles J. Dunlap Jr., “21st-Century Warfare: Four Dangerous Myths,” *Parameters*, Autumn 1997, pp. 27–37; Luttwak, “A Post-Heroic Military Policy”; Steven Metz and James Kievit, *The Revolution in Military Affairs and Conflict Short of War* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1994), pp. 12–16; Steven Metz, “Which Army After Next? The Strategic Implications of Alternative Futures,” *Parameters*, Autumn 1997, pp. 15–26; Ralph Peters, “The Culture of Future Conflict,” *Parameters*, Winter 1995–96, pp. 18–27; Ralph Peters, “The Future of Armored Warfare,” *Parameters*, Autumn 1997, pp. 50–59; Ralph Peters, “Our Soldiers, Their Cities,” *Parameters*, Spring 1996, pp. 43–50; Martin L. Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991). For an assessment that suggests American public will should not be underestimated in the face of such challenges, see Tucker, “Fighting Barbarians.”

¹⁵Alvin H. Bernstein and Martin Libicki, “High-Tech: The Future Face of War? A Debate,” *Commentary*, Jan. 1998, p. 31. See also Jeffrey Shaffer and Benjamin Ederington, *The Military Technical Revolution: A Structural Framework* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1993), pp. 10–12.

And the ramifications of accepting the logic of the quick, costless war presumption can be profound, because some defense analysts now argue that the supposed decline in American will mandates that the primary criterion for the evaluation of weapon systems should be whether these systems offer the prospects for minimum allied casualties.¹⁶

How is this purported decline in American will explained? The current diagnosis invokes pathologies beyond the dilemmas that protracted warfare pose for democracies or the specific legacy of Vietnam. Conventional wisdom now identifies a profound cultural shift linked to the prosperity and relative passivity of life in the post-industrial/information age. “Warrior culture” has declined, eroding Americans’ willingness to tolerate the sacrifices necessary to sustain international leadership. The expectation of relatively cheap, antiseptic wars such as that in the Persian Gulf, the rapid reassessment of American policy in Somalia following the death of eighteen Americans in the October 1993 Mogadishu fire-fight, and American hesitation in responding to the Bosnian crisis all conveniently reinforce the notion that deeper trends are at work. According to this argument, Americans have become “soft” relative to their more primitive adversaries. The exact nature of these “trends” remains for the most part elusive. Some have speculated that demographic changes—specifically, declining birth rates, smaller family sizes, and less personal contact with death—are making Western societies less willing to accept casualties.¹⁷ Others point the finger at a new generation of left-leaning, technologically oriented “culture warriors” who do not understand and, therefore, disparage the “warrior spirit.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, in its most recent form the logic of quick, costless war presumption suggests that a confluence of economic, social, and cultural forces will gather momentum in the future, thus eroding further the American will to sustain costly military operations abroad.¹⁹

A proper understanding of the historical development of “warrior culture” in American history and its relationship to public will, however, reveals that the evidence to sustain the quick, cost-

¹⁶Luttwak, “A Post-Heroic Military Policy,” pp. 40–44.

¹⁷Edward N. Luttwak, “Where Are the Great Powers? At Home with the Kids,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 1994, pp. 23–28; Edward N. Luttwak, “Toward Post-Heroic Warfare,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1995, pp. 115–116. For a rebuttal, see James Burk, “Public Support for Peacekeeping in Lebanon and Somalia: Assessing the Casualties Hypothesis,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring 1999, pp. 53–78.

¹⁸William C. Moore, “The Military Must Revive Its Warrior Spirit,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 27, 1998.

¹⁹See also John A. Gentry, “Military Force in an Age of National Cowardice,” *Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 1998, pp. 182–84.

less war presumption is lacking. And since poor diagnosis leads to poor prescription, the presumption is potentially dangerous.

The Eclipse of Traditional “Warrior Culture,” 1898–1940

Although the notion of “warrior culture” is familiar, a working definition is necessary to prevent any confusion with the other “cultures” commonly invoked in contemporary public debate. A warrior culture is one that celebrates martial training and skill, patriotism, national service, and above all, demonstrated valor in combat. Such values are sustained and reaffirmed through shared traditions, symbols, and other cultural practices and artifacts, including history, literature, and art. They can also be reinforced through both informal and formal mechanisms, such as privileged social status or the franchise. In the purist forms of warrior culture such values may be preeminent and provide the foundation for a nation’s social and political order. The nineteenth-century Zulu or Lakota Sioux, for instance, represented nearly absolute warrior cultures. This concept, however, should not be confused with “military culture,” a term frequently employed in contemporary strategic discourse to refer to the “prevailing values, norms, philosophies, customs, and traditions of the armed forces.”²⁰ Warrior culture, by contrast, encompasses shared societal values broadly speaking, not just those within specific military institutions. In other words, peoples possessing a warrior culture are—to employ historian John Keegan’s succinct definition—“brought up to fight, think fighting honorable, and think killing in warfare glorious.”²¹

Despite their martial heritage, Americans have never come close to embracing a pure warrior culture. Nonetheless, anyone who has walked the battlefield at Gettysburg feels viscerally that the men of the First Minnesota Regiment or Pickett’s division were unlike Americans of today. Michael Shaara’s *The Killer Angels* succeeds as historical fiction precisely because it recaptures a world so different from our own—one distinguished by dif-

ferent conceptions of personal honor, heroic sacrifice for one’s friends and cause, and the battlefield as the ultimate test of one’s virtue and strength.²² Looking back from our vantage point at the start of the twenty-first century, we perceive that many of the elements of warrior culture common 140 years ago no longer characterize American society. The place of warrior culture in American life has indisputably changed. Yet this change did not occur during the past few decades, as often implied by those who cite recent developments in news media, demographic trends, or the impact of post-industrial society. Rather, it was the First World War that eclipsed America’s traditional warrior culture.

At the dawn of the twentieth century many Americans still considered the battlefield the ultimate testing ground of a nation’s and individual’s virtue. To be sure, the American people never possessed a monolithic culture with regard to military affairs. A vibrant tradition of dissent that stressed anti-expansionism, exhibited a profound suspicion of military institutions and operations abroad, and sometimes came close to pacifism dated back to the founding of the republic.²³ Yet as late as 1898, the war with Spain could still be described without irony as a “Splendid Little War,” and many Americans, including prominent cultural leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt, imagined war a romantic activity. Although often portrayed as a master of realpolitik in histories of American foreign relations, Roosevelt remained a Victorian romantic who wholeheartedly embraced warrior culture, stressed the virtues of personal valor, and considered war the preeminent test of manhood. He famously resigned his position as assistant secretary of the navy to join the Rough Riders in Cuba, but more dramatically, he wished for his own sons to be tested in battle in the Great War, and confided to a friend his hope that they might even be wounded or lose a limb as a mark of valor.²⁴ Such ideas must seem utterly alien to most Americans today, but they reflected the nation’s previous embrace of warrior culture.

The First World War, however, extinguished the flame of this

²⁰Joseph J. Collins, “The Complex Context of American Military Culture: A Practitioner’s View,” *Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 1998, p. 213. On the various definitions of “military culture” in the current discussions of American military policy, see Don M. Snider, “An Uninformed Debate on Military Culture.” On the importance of “military culture” historically and in the current context, see Williamson Murray, “Does Military Culture Matter?”; and John Hillen, “Must U.S. Military Culture Reform?” The latter three, originally from *Orbis*, Winter 1999, are republished in this volume.

²¹John Keegan, “The Warrior’s Code of No Surrender,” *U.S. News and World Report*, Jan. 23, 1995, p. 47. See also his discussion of cultures centered upon warfare in *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1993), pp. 24–46.

²²For an assessment of the latest scholarship of motivation during the Civil War, see Mark Grimsley, “In Not So Dubious Battle: The Motivations of American Civil War Soldiers,” *Journal of Military History*, Jan. 1998, pp. 175–88.

²³Robert David Johnson, *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 10–33.

²⁴Kathleen M. Dalton, “Theodore Roosevelt’s Great War, 1917–1918,” Charles Warren Center Colloquium, Harvard University, Apr. 2, 1997. See also Edward J. Renehan Jr., *The Lion’s Pride: Theodore Roosevelt and His Family in Peace and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987), pp. 275–97.

romanticized warrior culture for the reason that it represented a qualitatively different kind of conflict from any that came before. President Woodrow Wilson's dream of making the world anew in an image of amity and cooperation helped sustain Americans' crusading zeal temporarily, but the failure to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and join the League of Nations, followed by the collapse of stability in Europe and the Pacific by the early 1930s, led Americans to doubt whether their battlefield sacrifices had served any good purpose whatsoever. In the public mind the singular heroic battlefield act lost its significance and was replaced instead by the image of mechanized slaughter in which the individual—whether on the home front or the battlefield—was merely a minor cog in a machine that dealt mass and pointless death.

In their disillusionment over the origins and results of Wilson's crusade, most Americans by the 1930s came to consider traditional warrior culture primitive and dangerous. This was the era of the Neutrality Acts, Senator Gerald Nye's Munitions Committee investigation, and the height of isolationism, when the congressional leadership of both parties and the leading voices in the press agreed that never again should the United States be duped into costly military adventures abroad, whether by "merchants of death" or idealists. Films and novels such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, as well as popular revisionist histories of the American entry into the First World War, captured these themes and gave them a wide audience.²⁵ Unlike today, the central foreign policy debates of the 1930s hinged upon prohibiting U.S. military involvement abroad altogether. And unlike today, few believed that U.S. interests extended beyond the Western Hemisphere. Americans' ostrich-like reaction to German, Italian, and Japanese expansion only seemed to confirm their sense of isolation from the storms whipping the rest of the world.

Indeed, by 1940 it seemed on the surface that Americans no longer possessed the stomach for war. Their geographic isolation allowed them to become insular and self-absorbed, while urbanization and mass entertainment reduced their frontier heritage to a trivial Hollywood genre. Despite its industrial potential, therefore, the United States appeared weak and decadent when compared to

nations still predicated upon the warrior ethos—Germany, Italy, and Japan. How could a democratic political system dependent upon the will of such a people ever hope to assume leadership in the international arena? Lacking the requisite will for a long, bitter struggle, the fascists assumed, Americans would undoubtedly negotiate a peace rather than challenge true warrior cultures on the battlefield. Thus, Hitler dismissed Americans as venal, weak-willed non-factors in his strategic calculus, while the Japanese leadership hoped that the American public would accept the fait accompli at Pearl Harbor and accommodate themselves to Japanese hegemony in the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere.²⁶ As events soon proved, however, a traditional warrior culture such as those stoked by Hitler and Tojo was not sufficient, or even necessary, for military success, and the remarkable American triumph over the Axis speaks to us today, highlighting the true foundations for successful international leadership.

The Great Transformation, 1940–1950

Between 1940 and 1950 a Great Transformation occurred. A large majority of Americans renounced isolationism and concluded that their nation had no choice but to accept international leadership. By 1950 Americans supported unprecedented military commitments abroad as well as the subsidization of Europe and Japan's economic rebirth. All this occurred despite the eclipse of traditional warrior culture following the First World War. This remarkable transformation, which defied all linear predictions based upon the trends of the 1930s, underscores the role that leading statesmen played in redefining Americans' conceptions of national security and reigniting their will to preserve it.

The most impressive collection of American statesmen since the Founding Fathers led the Great Transformation. By the late 1930s Franklin Roosevelt concluded that for the United States to assume leadership internationally the American people's vision of their place in the world needed to be transformed. So FDR assiduously educated the public to an appreciation of the need for a more active national security policy in the face of Axis aggression, rallying support for such departures as Lend-Lease and the

²⁵John Whiteclay Chambers II, "All Quiet on the Western Front' (1930): The Antiwar Film and the Image of the First World War," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 1994, pp. 377–411; Warren I. Cohen, *The American Revisionists: The Lessons of Intervention in World War I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America, 1935–1941*, reprint ed. (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1990).

²⁶Nobutaka Ike, ed., *Japan's Decision for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conferences* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967), pp. 133–63, 190, 199–239, 247–49, 281–83; Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (London: Longman, 1987), pp. 140–86; Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 30–53, 160, 182–89, 194–204.

first peacetime draft in U.S. history.²⁷ During the Second World War, Democratic and Republican leaders waged campaigns on the home front to convince the party faithful that the United States must remain engaged in international affairs following victory in order to insure the peace.²⁸ Concurrently, the nation's military leadership distinguished itself by devising and managing a strategy that exploited American economic superiority to crush the Axis powers. The deliberate, efficient "genius" of George C. Marshall epitomized the American approach to the war much more than did the anachronistic histrionics of "warriors" such as George Patton.²⁹ Following the war a formidable coalition composed of government officials, leaders from both political parties, and military officers then formulated the American response to the Soviet challenge and completed the redefinition of Americans' conception of national security. Harry Truman, Arthur Vandenberg, George Marshall, Dean Acheson, George Kennan, Paul Nitze, Dwight Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, Lucius Clay, James Forrestal, Robert Lovett, and John McCloy, and other such "Wise Men" sometimes disagreed about tactics, but together they convinced the American people that their basic values and way of life depended upon their willingness to preserve political and economic stability in Europe and Asia.³⁰

This outcome was not inevitable. The fascist and then communist challenges alone did not foreordain a transformation in U.S. strategic culture. Many powerful voices, especially within the Republican Party, advocated withdrawal behind the Monroe Doctrine and creation of a Fortress America. Such an alternative would have accorded well with the American tradition of "entangling alliances with none."³¹ Yet a unique constellation of personalities coalesced to articulate and promote the new global conception of national security. Who doubts, for example, that events

²⁷Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁸Robert A. Divine, *Second Chance: The Triumph of Internationalism in America during World War II* (New York: Atheneum, 1967).

²⁹Eliot Cohen, "The Strategy of Innocence? The United States, 1920–1945," in *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War*, ed. Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 464–65.

³⁰R. May, "Cold War and Defense," in *The Cold War and Defense*, ed. Keith Neilson and Ronald G. Haycock (New York: Praeger, 1990), pp. 7–73.

³¹It should be recalled that a primary motive behind Dwight D. Eisenhower's decision to seek the Republican presidential nomination in 1952 was his fear that Robert Taft might lead the nation toward isolationism if elected. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, vol. 1, *Soldier, General of the Army, President-Elect, 1890–1952* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 510–41.

may have turned out much differently if during the critical days of 1940 and 1941 the United States had not been led by FDR, a man possessing a unique combination of strategic vision, cunning political skills, and a keen understanding of the American public? Likewise, imagine how different the world might be if FDR had not replaced Henry Wallace with Truman as his vice president on the 1944 election ticket.

The Great Transformation between 1940 and 1950 in how Americans conceived of their national security ultimately reveals three basic conclusions relevant to current discussions regarding American will in the post–Cold War era.

First, what Americans consider a "national interest" for which they will expend blood and treasure can change over time. This may appear self-evident, but many analysts still assume that national interests are defined exclusively by timeless features of international relations (such as preserving territorial integrity) or the result of simple cost-benefit calculations of material interest. National interests encompass, but go well beyond, such tangible concerns. They also include moral values and ideals, the preservation of the American "way of life," and assessments about how the world works politically, economically, diplomatically, militarily, socially, and culturally. In sum, national interests are ultimately ideas, ideas that can change as values and beliefs about the world change.

Secondly, Americans' acceptance of a broader conception of national security—one that carried an unprecedented risk of future military operations abroad—was not constrained by the decline of traditional warrior culture. In other words, even though traditional values of the pre-1917 warrior culture were not rekindled, Americans resolutely faced international realities including the necessity of making significant sacrifices to preserve their expanded notion of national security.

Thirdly, human beings shape their own destiny. The American experience between 1940 and 1950 underscores the dangers of assuming that certain trends cannot be checked, redirected, reversed, or overcome by forceful leadership. In 1940 a person focusing upon the trends of the previous decade could have easily concluded—as did the Axis leadership—that the American people would never support another major war effort. Likewise, when the war finally ended in 1945, many anticipated that the United States would again disengage from the world. But history is not defined simply by the linear projection of trends into the future. Instead, as

demonstrated by American statesmen during the 1940s, sustained and deliberate leadership can transform the public's conception of national security *in spite of* historical traditions and previous social, economic, and cultural trends.

American Will in the Cold War Era, 1950–1989

The expanded notion of national security that was developed in the 1940s provided the foundation for American foreign and defense policy through the decades of the Cold War. A review of the long era of containment is well beyond the scope of this essay, but suffice to say that the American people did not reembrace warrior culture during the Cold War.³² The idea of the Second World War as “the Good War”—an idea reinforced by such images as John Wayne's portrayal of Sargent Stryker in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*—did become a powerful presence in American culture. Nonetheless, James Jones's ironic dedication to *The Thin Red Line* succinctly and more accurately captures how the Second World War generation of Americans viewed the experience of war in a fundamentally different way than did Teddy Roosevelt five decades before.³³ Instead of raising their children “to fight, think fighting honorable, and think killing in warfare glorious,” Americans in the 1950s and '60s reveled in their material prosperity and enjoyed a standard of living unprecedented in human history. These might have been considered debilitating handicaps to those who stress the significance of warrior culture. The American public, however, supported for four decades unprecedented commitments abroad with corresponding defense expenditures to sustain them—all without becoming a “garrison state.”³⁴

³²See John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

³³This book is dedicated to those greatest and most heroic of all human endeavors, WAR and WARFARE; may they never cease to give us the pleasure, excitement and adrenal stimulation that we need, or provide us with the heroes, the presidents and leaders, the monuments and museums which we erect to them in the name of PEACE.” James Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (New York: Delta Paperback, 1962). For a recent essay surveying the evolution of the World War II film genre, see Roger J. Spiller, “In the Dark,” *American Heritage*, Feb./Mar. 1999, pp. 41–51.

³⁴See Tom Englehardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusionment of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Aaron L. Friedberg, “Why Didn't the United States Become a Garrison State,” *International Security*, Spring 1992, pp. 109–42; Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: American Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995); Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

American public support during the “limited wars” in Korea and Vietnam deserves special attention. With images of the Second World War still fresh, Americans approached these conflicts with grim realism, not the romance of the first decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, based upon their significant sacrifices in these secondary theaters of the Cold War—including nearly one hundred thousand combat deaths—it is hard to argue that Americans displayed a debilitating sensitivity to casualties. Public support as measured in opinion polls started high in both conflicts and only waned to the degree that both conflicts dragged on inconclusively and casualties mounted. This parallel decline in support for the Korean and Vietnam Wars suggests, as political scientist John Mueller noted over twenty-five years ago, that public disenchantment was not a function of uncensored television broadcasts from Vietnam. Rather, support declined when reasonable questions emerged as to whether the costs were proportional to the objectives.³⁵ Is it surprising that the American public became restless over the prolongation of the Korean War when the principles and processes surrounding the repatriation of prisoners of war emerged as the crucial stumbling block in the armistice negotiations? Similarly, as the objective of preserving an independent South Vietnam continued to be frustrated years after the commitment of American ground forces, was not a reassessment in order? As Richard Betts emphasizes, the examples of Korea and Vietnam reveal that casualties alone do not undermine public support; rather, “casualties in an *inconclusive* war, casualties that the public sees as being suffered indefinitely, for no clear, good, or achievable purpose” lead to an erosion of support.³⁶

In retrospect, what is most striking about public support during the Korean and Vietnam Wars is not that it declined, but rather that it did not decline further and much more rapidly. In the case of Korea the public did not demand the withdrawal of American forces from the Korean peninsula after the signing of the armistice in 1953 and has not done so during the subsequent forty-eight years. Indeed, public support for an American presence along the DMZ continues despite the fact that a serious military confronta-

³⁵More precisely, public opinion as measured by polls correlates better with the logarithm of the number of casualties suffered than with either the number of casualties or the duration of the conflict. John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973), pp. 42–65, 167; John Mueller, “The Common Sense,” *National Interest*, Spring 1997, pp. 82–83. See also the refinement of Mueller's study offered in Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary M. Segura, “War, Casualties, and Public Opinion,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, June 1998, pp. 278–300.

³⁶Betts, “What Will It Take to Deter the United States?” p. 76.

tion, potentially involving nuclear weapons, remains a real possibility.³⁷ Similarly, the images of the vocal and sometimes violent Vietnam anti-war movement often overshadow the fact that many Americans, while desiring disengagement from the Vietnamese conflict, still did not favor unconditional, unilateral withdrawal, even as late as the 1970s. The notion of “Peace with Honor” still resonated after seven years of war.³⁸ Accepting for the sake of discussion the hypothetical scenario of a viable South Vietnamese government’s emerging and securing its borders around 1970, it is conceivable that U.S. forces might be standing watch today over the Seventeenth Parallel just as they do along the Thirty-eighth.

The foregoing observations should not minimize the detrimental impact the Vietnam conflict had upon the American polity and military. American leadership during the Vietnam era squandered public support, sowing the seeds of discord and skepticism in civil-military relations and public life more generally. And, of course, this failure of judgment and leadership further discredited the last exponents of warrior culture. Nonetheless, the rebound in American self-confidence and assertiveness during the 1980s demonstrated that American will, when combined with compelling public leadership, remained sound and resilient. Considered against the broader historical backdrop of the entire Cold War, therefore, the American public consistently demonstrated its will to defend its interests.

Misplaced Pessimism in the Post–Cold War Era

Perhaps the end of the Cold War changed all of this. Perhaps the American will to sacrifice disappeared along with the Soviet Union. After all, Americans had sacrificed blood and treasure in secondary theaters such as Korea and Vietnam not as ends in themselves, but as part of the global strategy of containing the Soviet challenge. Without the clear and present danger posed by an obvious ideological and military “peer competitor” to hold them in check, other forces might come to the fore and erode the

³⁷For example, the 1996 Foreign Policy Leadership Survey revealed that 63 percent of the respondents favored the use of U.S. troops to resist a North Korean invasion of South Korea. Table 3 in Ole R. Holsti, “Continuity and Change in the Domestic and Foreign Policy Beliefs of American Opinion Leaders,” paper at 1997 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Aug. 28–31, 1997.

³⁸In May 1971, for instance, 55 percent of Americans opposed the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam by the end of 1971 if it meant a communist takeover of South Vietnam, while 75 percent opposed such a withdrawal if it threatened the lives or safety of the U.S. prisoners of war held by the North Vietnamese. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, pp. 97–98.

public’s will. Recent analyses finger the usual suspects that might weaken American will, namely, the intertwined factors of Americans’ lack of warrior culture, materialism bred of prosperity, relative isolation from the savage realities of international life, and new information-age lifestyles. Consequently, they suggest, the will to tolerate anything beyond minimal casualties will decline in the future, thus limiting future U.S. military policy to quick, relatively low cost operations. On the surface, such fears sound compelling. However, evidence from the four most significant post–Cold War military crises—the Gulf War, Somalia, the Bosnian conflict, and the Kosovo intervention—confirms that reports of the demise of the American will have been greatly exaggerated.

The widespread public support for the Persian Gulf War undercuts the simplistic notion that Americans will only support military operations that promise minimal casualties. While it is true that Americans sustained relatively light casualties in Desert Storm, what matters is the public expectation of casualties *before* Desert Storm. In the months leading up to the allied offensive, no public consensus emerged regarding the potential costs of liberating Kuwait. Although few opinion leaders expected defeat, many offered pessimistic assessments of the potential costs of a ground offensive against Iraq. Military experts estimated casualty figures ranging from the thousands to tens of thousands, depending upon the particular scenario.³⁹ Testifying before Congress in November 1990, for example, Edward Luttwak cautioned that his analysis, based upon “the most optimistic assumptions of the most optimistic briefer,” predicted “thousands of killed in action, wounded, and the inevitable quotient of missing-in-action.”⁴⁰

³⁹Testimony in December 1990 before the House Armed Services Committee displayed a representative range of casualty estimates by well-informed military observers. Col. Trevor N. Depuy reported that his computer simulation of different ground offensive scenarios predicted total American casualties ranging from 6,000 to 18,000, with 1,000–3,000 fatalities. He estimated that an air campaign would result in 1,800 American casualties, 300 of them killed in action. U.S. Air Force Gen. Charles L. Donnelly Jr., and Russell E. Dougherty considered Depuy’s estimates reasonable. James A. Blackwell Jr., of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, stated that allied casualties could reach 30,000, and Col. Harry S. Summers supported this more pessimistic estimate. However, Les Aspin, summarizing his personal assessment of the testimony, concluded “the prospects for a rapid victory with light to moderate American casualties, perhaps three to five thousand including five hundred to a thousand or so fatalities, are high.” *Crisis in the Persian Gulf: Sanctions, Diplomacy and War, Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 101st Congress, Second Session* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), pp. 336, 419, 462–63, 488, 916–17. See also Powell, *My American Journey*, p. 485.

⁴⁰Edward N. Luttwak testimony, *The Persian Gulf Crisis: Joint Hearings before the Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Security and Science, Europe and the*

Public expectations reflected these concerns. From the beginning of the Kuwaiti crisis in August 1990, the majority of Americans believed that if war with Iraq should occur, it would be over within one year, but would not be an easy operation. Polls taken in early January 1991 revealed that over 60 percent of Americans expected the war would result in “a high number of American deaths,” while only 10–13 percent anticipated fewer than a thousand combat deaths. As late as February 10, 1991, 47 percent believed that Americans would suffer casualties in the range of “several thousand” or “tens of thousands.”⁴¹ Despite such concerns, a clear majority supported the use of force to compel Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait.⁴²

The minimal casualties suffered during the Gulf War pleasantly surprised the American people. Their surprise, however, highlights their willingness to endure a much higher cost to secure the national interest. Moreover, the subsequent terrorist attacks against the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia and the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania have generated no calls for withdrawal from the Persian Gulf region.⁴³ If anything, the protracted dispute with Iraq has increased the demand for more forceful policies aimed at toppling Saddam Hussein.⁴⁴ The American people, therefore, continue to demonstrate a will to tolerate the costs of defending their conception of the national interest.

By contrast, the rapid reevaluation of U.S. policy toward Somalia following the Mogadishu firefight that left eighteen Americans dead is commonly cited as proof that public will to sustain U.S. policy is absent. This reasoning, however, overlooks the fundamental cause of the reversal in Somalia, namely, the lack of a coherent policy. Indeed, the Somali case is analogous to the Lebanese disaster ten years before. In both cases, U.S. forces were initially deployed on a peacekeeping or humanitarian mission. As the political context changed, decision makers in Washington

Middle East, and on International Operations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Joint Economic Committee, 101st Cong., 2nd Sess., Nov. 28, 1990 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 328.

⁴¹Tables 223, 224, 226, and 228 in John E. Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 305–7.

⁴²The Jan. 13, 1991, ABC/*Washington Post* poll, for instance, found 76 percent of Americans approved the congressional resolution authorizing President Bush to go to war. The same poll also revealed that 55 percent of Americans expected the war would result in a “high number of American deaths.” Tables 65 and 227 in Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War*, pp. 222, 307.

⁴³The author would like to thank Stephen Peter Rosen for suggesting this point.

⁴⁴For the skeptical evaluation of such proposals, see Daniel Byman, Kenneth Pollack, and Gideon Rose, “The Rollback Fantasy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 1999, pp. 24–41.

altered policy, but without systematic reevaluation of military deployments on the ground. In both cases, the shock of unexpected casualties—in Lebanon the bombing of the Marine Corps barracks that left 241 Americans dead, in Somalia the costly mission to capture warlord Mohammed Farrah Aideed—forced thorough reviews of U.S. policy. These reviews concluded that the risks of further casualties were not proportionate to the interests at stake. Consequently, in both cases, after waiting long enough to avoid signaling panic, the respective administrations withdrew American forces.⁴⁵

The public outcry in the case of Somalia was not the result of weakness of will or a “CNN effect.”⁴⁶ Whether the visual images of the carnage in the streets of Mogadishu were carried live or broadcast hours or days later was less relevant than the Clinton administration’s failure to explain why a policy entailing the risks of such casualties had merit. If a convincing case had been forthcoming, the American people conceivably could have “rallied around the flag” and supported a military escalation that promised worthwhile results and restored the nation’s honor. Indeed, some poll data indicate that a majority of Americans supported more forceful action in Somalia in the immediate aftermath of the October firefight.⁴⁷ But, just as in Lebanon, the president concluded that no compelling justification existed and decided that a swift exit was the lesser of evils. American policy failed the American people in Somalia, not vice versa.

Likewise, in the Bosnian crisis that unraveled after 1992, prevailing wisdom portrayed public support for involvement in the conflict as meager at best. However, this notion that the American people were hostile to more forceful action in Bosnia does not hold up in the face of systematic examination. In the most thorough and sophisticated analysis to date of poll data and media

⁴⁵On the development of American policy leading to the Lebanon tragedy, see George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years As Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993), pp. 196–234; Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, pp. 115–17, 135–74.

⁴⁶As Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Kenneth Bacon has argued, “It wasn’t because the press was there that we’ve had disastrous stories; it was because we got into a disastrous situation, which was covered by the press.” “Covering the War,” *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, Apr. 20, 2000 (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june00/vietnam_4-20.html). For a debunking of the myth of the “CNN effect” in the Somali case, see Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, pp. 45–46, 71. See also Mueller, “The Common Sense,” pp. 83–85.

⁴⁷Steven Kull and I. M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), pp. 104–8; Tucker, “Fighting Barbarians,” p. 76; Burk, “Public Support for Peacekeeping in Lebanon and Somalia,” pp. 53–78.

coverage, Richard Sobel debunks the myth of a fundamentally weak American public will regarding the Bosnian conflict. It is true that before the Dayton accords Americans consistently opposed *unilateral* military action in Bosnia, and public support for any involvement in the crisis was volatile. Such volatility, however, was more a function of the lack of leadership, especially from the president, than anything else. Nonetheless, before Dayton a reservoir of public support existed for U.S. participation in *multilateral* military operations under the auspices of the United Nations or NATO, such as facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance or using force to protect U.N. peacekeepers from Serbian attacks. This support reflected a combination of realism and humanitarianism, that is, a desire to prevent the conflict from expanding beyond Bosnia while relieving the suffering of those directly affected by the war. Sobel's analysis reveals that systematic bias in the major news media promoted the inaccurate "conventional wisdom" that no public support existed for American action in Bosnia. American media consistently underreported or inaccurately reported the true complexities of public opinion and emphasized instead the most vehement and vocal opposition to involvement in Bosnia. The American public possessed a more mature and skeptical, yet activist, mindset regarding Bosnia than has been credited. Thus, whatever the conventional wisdom may say, U.S. policy toward Bosnia has not been fundamentally constrained by either a paralytic fear of casualties on the part of the American public or demands for rapid disengagement.⁴⁸

Lastly, the American public's response to the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo discredits further the quick, costless war presumption. When Operation Allied Force began in March 1999, most Americans could not even identify which side the United

⁴⁸Richard Sobel, "U.S. and European Attitudes toward Intervention in the Former Yugoslavia: *Mourir pour la Bosnie?*" in *The World and Yugoslavia's Wars*, ed. Richard H. Ullman (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996), pp. 145–81; Richard Sobel, "Portraying American Public Opinion toward the Bosnia Crisis," *Harvard Journal of Press/Politics*, Spring 1998, pp. 16–33; Richard Sobel, "United States Intervention in Bosnia," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Summer 1998, pp. 250–78; Kull and Destler, *Misreading the Public*, pp. 108–9. Contrary to the opinion of many, European public opinion throughout the Bosnia crisis in fact supported more vigorous military action than their respective political leaders offered. See Sobel, "U.S. and European Attitudes toward Intervention in the Former Yugoslavia." On the generation of congressional and public support for the deployment of American forces to Bosnia, see Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York: Random House, 1998), pp. 316–18. Three years after their initial deployment, 63 percent of Americans still approved of the presence of U.S. troops in Bosnia, even though a majority mistakenly believed that American soldiers had been killed by hostile fire in Bosnia during the previous year. Program on International Policy Attitudes, "Americans on Kosovo: A Study of US Public Attitudes," May 19, 1999 (<http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Kosovo.kosovo.html>).

States was supporting and which it opposed. However, as attention to and understanding of the conflict increased, public support for U.S. participation in the NATO military campaign rose to 60 percent by mid-April 1999. A majority never considered Kosovo a "vital interest," but perceived a moral obligation to protect Kosovar civilians from the Serbian campaign of ethnic cleansing.⁴⁹ Accordingly, a majority of Americans, after weighing the costs of the engagement against their determination to succeed, approved of an operation that they thought would be neither quick nor costless. After initial hopes for a quick capitulation by Milosevic faded, the public supported continuing the operation "as long as necessary" while remaining skeptical that air strikes alone would bring peace. It is especially noteworthy that more than half of Americans not only expected that U.S. ground troops would be necessary, but supported that option despite the perceived high risk of U.S. casualties. Americans opposed a bloody, protracted war, but accepted the risk of casualties as the cost of returning the Kosovar refugees to their homes.⁵⁰

The public's support of the operation's objectives owes very

⁴⁹*Los Angeles Times* Poll Alert, Study #425, Mar. 26, 1999 (http://www.latimes.com/news/timespoll/national/lat_tpoll990326.htm); Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, March 1999 News Interest Index, Mar. 24–28, 1999, "Few See Strategic Interests, Humanitarian Concerns Cited: Support for NATO Air Strikes with Plenty of Butts," Mar. 29, 1999 (<http://www.people-press.org/marchrel1.htm>); Pew Research Center, Kosovo News Interest Index, Apr. 15–18, 1999, "Clinton Ratings Dip: Continued Public Support for Kosovo, But Worries Grow," Apr. 21, 1999 (<http://www.people-press.org/kosovorpt.htm>); Pew Research Center, May 1999 News Interest Index, May 12–16, "Collateral Damage Taking Its Toll: Americans Disengaging from Kosovo," May 18, 1999 (<http://www.people-press.org/may99rpt1.htm>); Gallup Organization, "Kosovo in Crisis: U.S. Role and Clinton Approval" (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/Indkosovo.asp>); *Washington Post*-ABC News polls, Apr. 8 and May 18, 1999 (<http://washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/vault/stories/data040899.htm> and [/data051899.htm](http://washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/vault/stories/data051899.htm)); Gary Langer and Ben Fitzpatrick, "Tempered by Risk," Apr. 8, 1999 (http://abcnews.go.com/sections/world/dailynews/kosovo_pol990409.htm); *New York Times*/CBS News poll, Apr. 5–6, 1999 (<http://www.nytimes.com/library/national/040899poll-results.html>); CNN, "Poll: Americans Split on NATO Airstrikes," Mar. 25, 1999 (<http://www.cnn.com/US/9903/35/kosovo.poll/index.html>); Program on International Policy Attitudes, "Americans on Kosovo." An insightful preliminary analysis of American public opinion during the Kosovo intervention is Robert D. Killebrew and Javid Ali, "Air Power and Public Opinion in Operation Allied Force," study prepared for the Association of the United States Army, 1999. The author wishes to thank Col. Killebrew for providing a copy of this unpublished report.

⁵⁰Mark Gillespie, "Support Grows for Kosovo Mission, But Public Still Divided," Gallup Poll Release, Mar. 26, 1999 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr990326.asp>); *Los Angeles Times* Poll Alert, Study #425; *New York Times*/CBS News Poll, Apr. 5–6, 1999; Dan Balz, "Consensus Grows to Send Ground Troops," *Washington Post*, Apr. 6, 1999; *Washington Post*-ABC News Polls, Apr. 8 and 28, 1999 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/vault/stories/data040899.htm> and [/data042899.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/vault/stories/data042899.htm)); Pew Research Center, Kosovo News Interest Index, Apr. 15–18, 1999, "Clinton Ratings Dip: Continued Public Support for Kosovo, But Worries Grow," Apr. 21, 1999; Gallup Organization, "Kosovo in Crisis"; Program on International Policy Attitudes, "Americans on Kosovo."

little, however, to presidential or congressional leadership, which remained lackluster throughout the eleven-week campaign. Indeed, President Clinton never convinced most Americans that he possessed a coherent strategy in Kosovo.⁵¹ They supported the intervention because their moral outrage and resolve overcame their skepticism. The public shifted its support to a bombing pause and opening negotiations only when the air campaign continued into May 1999 without any sign of success or a change in military strategy. This shift, however, reflected concern not about potential American costs, but about the air campaign's failure to halt the deprivations inflicted upon Kosovar civilians. Even then, the American public preferred continuing the military campaign to accepting a settlement that abandoned the Kosovars to their fate at Serb hands.⁵²

After the air campaign ended on June 10, 1999, Americans supported continued U.S. involvement in Kosovo, despite their considerable misgivings as to the region's long-term prospects for peace. Only two Americans in five considered Operation Allied Force a "victory," and roughly half concluded that it had not been "worth it." Nevertheless, a clear majority favored U.S. participation in the peacekeeping operation even though most felt it would likely become a long-term commitment with a risk of future casualties.⁵³ Thus, Americans proved again that they would not recoil from the costs of upholding their international obligations. While conflicted over their government's strategy, a majority remained determined to reverse the ethnic cleansing of the Kosovars. Although a rapid deterioration of the situation might lead to a reevaluation of the risks and stakes in the Balkans, the Kosovo experience demonstrates that the presumption of quick, costless war exists more in the minds of some policymakers and pundits than in the minds of the American people.

⁵¹New York Times/CBS News Poll, Apr. 5–6, 1999; Gallup Organization, "Kosovo in Crisis."

⁵²Frank Newport, "Support for U.S. Kosovo Involvement Drops," Gallup Poll Release, May 26, 1999 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr990526.asp>); Pew Research Center, "Collateral Damage Taking Its Toll"; *Washington Post*-ABC News Poll, May 18, 1999.

⁵³Gallup Organization, "Kosovo in Crisis"; Gary Langer, "Doubting Americans," June 11, 1999 (http://more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/dailynews/kosovo_langer990611.html); Frank Newport, "New Poll on Kosovo Finds Underwhelmed Public," Gallup Poll Release, June 11, 1999 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr990611c.asp>); Pew Research Center, "Muted and Mixed Public Response to Peace in Kosovo," June 15, 1999 (<http://www.people-press.org/nato99rpt.htm>).

The Dangers of Misjudging American Will

A nation's will provides the foundation upon which military policy is built. The American experience in the twentieth century belies the simplistic notion that the lack of a pervasive warrior culture translates into weakness of will in the international arena. It would be ironic, therefore, if now, at the time of our greatest strength, we underestimate our own will because we overemphasize the significance of certain cultural, economic, or demographic trends. Moreover, this would be doubly ironic because our past enemies grossly misjudged American will for the same reason—and paid dearly for their errors. If we fall into this trap, the potential dangers for the United States could be no less serious.

The dangers will arise both at home and abroad. Domestically, continued acceptance of the quick, costless war presumption risks becoming a debilitating, self-fulfilling prophecy. After all, how can we expect the American public and military to cope with future exigencies requiring protracted operations or entailing significant casualties if such contingencies are defined away as beyond American will? Even if a crisis posing such dilemmas should never occur (an unlikely eventuality), the quick, costless war presumption threatens civil-military relations. The passing of the torch of leadership from the generation that came of age during the Great Transformation to one defined by Vietnam has already strained these relations.⁵⁴ However, the corrosive effects upon civil-military relations will be even more profound if future military leaders mature within an organizational culture that believes the American people represent the weak link in the chain of military policy.

Abroad, our allies will be discouraged and our enemies

⁵⁴For the current debate surrounding the state of civil-military relations, see A. J. Bacevich, "Tradition Abandoned: America's Military in a New Era," *National Interest*, Summer 1997, pp. 16–25; Andrew J. Bacevich and Richard H. Kohn, "Grand Army of the Republicans," *New Republic*, Dec. 8, 1997, pp. 22–24; Elliot A. Cohen, "Civil-Military Relations," *Orbis*, Spring 1997, pp. 177–86 (reprinted in this volume); Ole R. Holsti, "A Widening Gap between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society? Some Evidence, 1976–96," *International Security*, Winter 1998/99, pp. 5–42; Douglas Johnson and Steven Metz, "Civil-Military Relations in the United States: The State of the Debate," *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 1995, pp. 197–213; Richard Kohn, "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Affairs," *National Interest*, Spring 1994, pp. 3–17; "An Exchange on Civil-Military Relations," *National Interest*, Summer 1994, pp. 23–31; Edward N. Luttwak, "Washington's Biggest Scandal," *Commentary*, May 1994, pp. 29–33; Edward N. Luttwak, "From Vietnam to *Desert Fox*: Civil-Military Relations in Modern Democracies," *Survival*, Spring 1999, pp. 99–112; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "The Civilian-Military Gap Flap," poll analysis, Dec. 10, 1999 (<http://www.people-press.org/99watch3.htm>); Thomas Ricks, "The Widening Gap Between the Military and Society," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1997, pp. 67–78; "A Symposium on Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces and Society*, Spring 1998, pp. 375–462.

encouraged. In the future the United States will more often than not participate in multilateral military operations for reasons of legitimacy, both international and domestic, and efficacy. Yet predicating American capabilities and policy upon the quick, costless war presumption will inevitably call into question the credibility of the American commitment to its allies, thus making the formation of multilateral military initiatives considerably more difficult. Why should our allies commit themselves to operations that we are not willing to undertake alongside them?⁵⁵ If we choose to rely upon others to do the heavy lifting, the lifting might never get done. And, naturally, our prospective adversaries hope for exactly this outcome. As numerous analysts have suggested and recent wargames conducted by the U.S. military confirm, a cunning opponent will develop so-called asymmetric strategies and tactics to force Americans to choose between undertaking costly, protracted operations or capitulation.⁵⁶ Over the long term, therefore, continued adherence to the quick, costless war presumption could well become the United States' Achilles' heel.

The most insidious danger, however, is the belief that a decline in American will is foreordained and that therefore no opportunity exists to recast the public's conception of its national interests and stoke its will to preserve them. Economic, cultural, and demographic trends may then be used as an excuse not to exercise leadership when leadership is most urgently needed.

Only sustained, articulate, and farsighted leadership, prefer-

⁵⁵Even so unorthodox a thinker as Ralph Peters succumbs to the quick, costless war presumption when contemplating burden sharing between the U.S. and its allies. For instance, he offers as one of his ten "tenets" for future U.S. military operations in urban areas: "Do the job fast. If the job can't be done fast, get somebody else to do it." Peters, "The Future of Armored Warfare," p. 59.

⁵⁶During the 1998 spring wargame of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's Army After Next Project, the adversary planned his campaign (set in the year 2021) with precisely this intent. Before American forces could deploy in theater, enemy forces seized strategic urban areas, dug in, and then called for a cease-fire and negotiations. The American leadership was thus presented with the unpalatable choice of either dislodging the enemy from "hedgehog" positions, which would strain both domestic and alliance support, or negotiating a settlement with an opponent who held many trump cards. The adversary further complicated American planning by positioning prisoners of war, foreign nationals, and civilians in, around, and on top of strategic facilities. The U.S. leadership decided to eject the enemy from its fortified positions at the cost of thousands of American casualties. Such a campaign could easily prove difficult for the military to accomplish and shocking to the public if both expect a quick, costless war in the years ahead. Author's observations at the Army After Next Project 1998 Spring Wargame, Apr. 20-29, 1998. In light of such findings, the Army After Next's 1998 annual report to the Chief of Staff of the Army notes that "short wars and short campaigns are not guaranteed in the future." *Knowledge and Speed: Battle Force and the U.S. Army of 2025* (Ft. Monroe, Va.: TRADOC, 1998), p. 3. On the Army After Next Project, see the special feature in *Military Review*, Mar.-Apr. 1998, pp. 2-57; Richard J. Newman, "Bombs Get Smarter; What About Generals?" *U.S. News and World Report*, May 18, 1998, pp. 42-43.

ably by the president, can counter these dangers of misjudging American will. The time for such leadership is now, as the military policy for the next century takes shape. For just as the will of the American people ought not be underestimated, neither can it be taken for granted. The public will to sustain difficult, costly military operations cannot be manufactured after a crisis emerges by spin control, sound bites, and televised rallies, which at worst become embarrassing spectacles, as exemplified by the Ohio State University "town meeting" during the flare-up of tensions with Iraq in February 1998.

How can the will to sustain necessary but expensive long-term commitments be cultivated? The answer does not lie in nostalgia for a past warrior culture. How many Americans, including members of the armed forces and veterans, would want to resurrect the culture that led Teddy Roosevelt to hope that his own children would be maimed in war? Instead, our national leaders—elected officials, career and appointed government administrators, and military officers alike—must foster a realistic public understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and potential *costs* of leadership in international affairs. As weapons of mass destruction proliferate, these potential costs include the real risk of prolonged operations with casualties well beyond the few hundred the United States has suffered since Vietnam. The popular enthusiasm for quick technological solutions should always be tempered by a realistic appraisal of the fundamental nature of warfare. Especially while debating the merits of the RMA, the temptation to use the quick, costless war presumption as a rhetorical trump card must be resisted. What is needed instead is a program of "strategic candor." This is not the easy path, but it is the only one in our democratic system that will lead to long-term success.⁵⁷

Admittedly, recent developments do not inspire optimism. Domestic affairs have consumed the attention of the nation's executive and legislative leadership. Whether one approves or disapproves of the enlargement of NATO or the extension of the American peacekeeping presence in Bosnia, the fact that neither policy stimulated vigorous public debate is discouraging. Even

⁵⁷The phrase "strategic candor" is adapted from Bacevich, "Tradition Abandoned," pp. 20-21. In this case, the idea of "candor" harkens back to the abortive Project Candor during the first year of Eisenhower's presidency. The initial intent behind this initiative, which was eventually reduced to Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" proposal before the U.N. General Assembly in December 1953, was to explain to the American public the realities of international relations in the thermonuclear age in order to prevent alarm, panic, or malaise, and, correspondingly, to generate continued support for American international leadership.

more disappointing is the lack of sustained consideration of the long-term implications of NATO's commitments in Kosovo. Indeed, the prediction in May 2000 by the top American commander there that NATO peacekeepers might be needed in the Balkans "for at least a generation" scarcely caused a ripple.⁵⁸ A shallow understanding of such expansions of our foreign obligations will weaken public support should a serious crisis erupt in the future. Yet it is not too late. Americans consistently place more confidence in the military than in any other major institution in society.⁵⁹ They are also not as introverted or isolationist as some fear and others hope, however reticent they may be to search abroad for dragons to slay.⁶⁰

In the years ahead, Americans' will to endure the costs necessary to secure themselves and their interests can be sustained, but only through dedicated, farsighted statesmanship. Is the current "baby boom" generation of leaders up to the task? Our allies and enemies wait to find out.

⁵⁸ John Donnelly, "US General Sees Long Role in Balkans," *Boston Globe*, May 2, 2000. See also Lenard J. Cohen, "Kosovo: 'Nobody's Country,'" *Current History*, Mar. 2000, pp. 117–23; David Rohde, "Kosovo Seething," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2000, pp. 65–79.

⁵⁹ Leslie McAneny, "Military on Top, HMOs Last in Public Confidence," Gallup Poll Release, July 14, 1999. For polling data reflecting public confidence in the military during the past decade, see George Gallup Jr., *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1997* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1998), pp. 128–33.

⁶⁰ Aaron L. Friedberg, "Are Americans Becoming Isolationist?" *Commentary*, Nov. 1998, pp. 45–48; Ole R. Holsti, "Continuity and Change in the Domestic and Foreign Policy Beliefs of American Opinion Leaders"; Bruce W. Jentleson and Rebecca L. Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Aug. 1998, pp. 395–417; Andrew Kohut and Robert C. Toth, "Arms and the People," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 1994, pp. 47–61; Kull and Destler, *Misreading the Public*; Mueller, "The Common Sense," pp. 81–88; John E. Reilly, ed., *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1999* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1999); U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, *New World Coming: American Security in the 21st Century—Supporting Research and Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, Sept. 15, 1999), pp. 116–30.